

Whoever Belongs to God Listens to What God Says

John 8:46-59

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Hymn: ELH #276—“When O’er My Sins I Sorrow”

Let us pray: O God, grant us true repentance, that we may turn to you in faith, grasping your Word of the Gospel and believing in the forgiveness offered in your true Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord; in whose name we pray. Amen.

John 8:46-59

[Jesus said,] ⁴⁶“Who of you can convict me of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me? ⁴⁷Whoever belongs to God listens to what God says. The reason you do not listen is that you do not belong to God.”

⁴⁸The Jews responded, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?”

⁴⁹Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon. On the contrary, I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰I do not seek my own glory. There is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹Amen, Amen,^a I tell you: If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never see death.”

⁵²So the Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets. Yet you say, ‘If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never taste death.’ ⁵³You

are not greater than our father, Abraham, are you? He died. And the prophets died. Who do think you are?”

⁵⁴Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, about whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ ⁵⁵Yet you do not really know him, but I do know him. If I said, ‘I do not know him,’ I would be a liar like you. But I do know him, and I hold on to his word. ⁵⁶Your father Abraham was glad that he would see my day. He saw it and rejoiced.”

⁵⁷The Jews replied, “You aren’t even fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?”

⁵⁸Jesus said to them, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Before Abraham was born, I am.” ⁵⁹Then they picked up stones to throw at him. But Jesus was hidden and left the temple area.

^a Usually, people say Amen at the end of a prayer. But Jesus used this Hebrew word at the beginning of a statement, which was unique. The inspired writer simply transliterated the Hebrew word that Jesus spoke, instead of using a Greek term. This translation does the same in English. The basic meaning is I solemnly tell you the truth. For more information about this, see FAQ #1 at wartburgproject.org/faqs.

Dear children of Abraham,

What do you believe? Why do you believe it? You could answer both of these questions in the words of the children's hymn: "Jesus loves me, this I know For the Bible tells me so." If we wish to know the truth, we will in fact listen to the Word of Truth: the Scriptures, the Bible. This is how we know all that we know. But not everyone listens to this Word. As Jesus said to the Jews, "Whoever belongs to God listens to what God says. The reason you do not listen is that you do not belong to God." Therefore, if we belong to God, we listen to what he says.

I. God Is the Judge

This is because God is the judge, not *me*. In an individualistic culture such as the one we have in America, each person wants the right to believe what he wants to believe. On the one hand, this freedom of religion is a great blessing that we enjoy. On the other hand, we might be tempted to think that then *I* the individual get to sit in judgment over the doctrines that come past me. This was an unintended effect of the Reformation. Luther shirked the authority of the pope and church councils, for he noticed that they were men and sought to place their authority over the authority of Scripture. Many people saw this shirking of papal authority as license to judge the truth themselves. Ultimately, though, this is no different. Whether pope, council, or individual Christian, no human being has the right to judge the truths of Scripture. Instead, *God* is the judge. We are beholden to his Word, to listen "to what God says."

The Jews, also, sought to be judges of the truth. Even though Jesus proved to them that he was sinless and spoke the truth, they rejected him and pronounced their

own judgment: “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” This was preferable to them than the truth, that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior who came to fulfill the Law and bring forgiveness and life to all. Any number of reasons could’ve been in the Jews’ minds for their rejection. Perhaps Jesus was not the political Messiah they wanted. Perhaps they liked feeling holier than the Gentiles who would supposedly be saved by Jesus as the Jews would be. In the context of this text, they were reacting with venom to Jesus’ statements that convicted them of sin: He had said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32, ESV), and “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (8:34, ESV).

Whatever their reasons, they were personal reasons, causing them to place their own opinions higher than the truth of God’s Word. The proof that they were absolutely refusing to listen to Jesus comes in this interchange:

[Jesus said] ‘Amen, Amen, I tell you: If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never see death.’

So the Jews said to him, ‘Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets. Yet you say, “If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never taste death.”’

Did you catch it? Jesus said, “If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never *see* death.” The Jews quoted him as saying, “If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never *taste* death.” Jesus used the word *θεωρήσει*, and the Jews used the word *γεύσεται*. Each of these words can mean “experience,” with the sense of “he will certainly never *experience* death,” but the Jews almost deliberately used a different

word, proving that they intended in no way to “hold on to [Jesus’] word.” Literally, they reject his word.

The difference between these two words is also telling as regards the different worldviews of Jesus and the Jews. Jesus says that the one who holds on to his word will never see — θεωρήση — death. θεωρήση means to observe or to stare intently upon, not just to glimpse. Jesus seems to mean that the one who holds onto his word will never stare death in the face with eternal terror. The Jews in turn think that Jesus means that the one who holds onto his word will never taste — γεύσηται — death. This tasting is far less intense than the *seeing* that Jesus spoke of. To *taste* death in this way would mean to feel its sting, to undergo the bitter palate and pain of death. But this tasting is a one-and-done deal. When death is tasted, or “eaten,” another translation of γεύσηται, it passes through the digestive system and is gone.

The different perspectives are those of the temporal vs. the eternal. To disprove Jesus, the Jews seek to point out a contradiction between his Word and the Scriptures (and history), which declare that “Abraham died, and so did the prophets.” But Jesus says that the one who holds on to his word will *not* die. They are thinking in terms of temporal death — the only thing which matters to them. Jesus is speaking in terms of eternal death — something of far greater import than temporal death.

Whereas the Jews were reading Jesus’ words (and the Word of God) as *they* wanted to, interpreting it and judging over it according to their desires, observe the attitude of Jesus — although he is Very God of Very God, in whom “the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9, ESV) — he humbles himself and declares, “I do not

seek my own glory. There is one who seeks it, and he is the judge.” He does not set himself up as judge over the truth, but proclaims the truth that God sent him to proclaim – God who *is* the judge over the truth. Even when the Jews gave him opportunity to defend himself, saying, “Who do you think you are?” Jesus would not boast, but said, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me.”

Observe this great mystery, what St. Paul called “the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.” (1 Tim. 3:16, ESV)

It is the mystery that Jesus, who is God himself, humbles himself (always remember Jesus’ purpose! This whole dialogue becomes clear if you remember that Jesus came to take our sins onto himself and to die in our place on the cross!), and this is the great Word which he brings, which gives life to those who hold on to it. Jesus will not glorify himself; God will glorify him. Jesus knows glory, but does “not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil 2:6, ESV). Instead he humbles himself – not because this means he will receive glory from his Father, but because this will fill the needs of the people! *Everything* he does he does in an act of self-sacrifice to save the souls of mankind.

If Jesus himself would give up the right to judge the truth, what right do any of us think we have to judge it? Instead, we may use this as our confession:

We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119:105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal. 1:8.¹

In other words, God's Word decides truth, speaks truth, and *is truth*. In this truth, it proclaims Jesus Christ, who himself brought the Word of Truth for the life of those who believe.

II. Jesus, True God, Brings the Word of Life

Remember, this was the purpose for Jesus coming into the world: "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8, ESV); "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world," he said, "to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). He brings the truth, which is God's Word, and says of it, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never see death." When Jesus prefaces a statement with the double "Amen, Amen," as he does frequently in John's Gospel, that is a word which Jesus wishes us to pay especial attention to. He is telling us a truth regarding our salvation: if anyone holds on to Jesus' Word, that person escapes death and has life.

And the opposite is also true. If anyone does *not* hold on to Jesus' Word, then he will indeed see death. John wrote earlier in his Gospel:

He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who

¹ Formula of Concord, Epitome 1, *The Book of Concord Online*, < <http://bookofconcord.org/fc-ep.php#ComprehensiveSummary,RuleandNorm>>.

comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (John 3:31-36, ESV)

This is a stern warning: unbelief brings death – and not just temporal death, but *eternal* death. This is nothing to wink at. Serious things are at stake. It is in fact *because* such serious things are at stake that many (the Jews, as well as we by nature) reject the truth of God and instead choose to believe our own things. We don't want to relinquish the power over our own lives, but would prefer to save ourselves. Thanks be to God that he does not leave us in such a sorry state, but sent his Son to bring us life. "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29, ESV), said Jesus. It is not *our* work to believe. God works this faith in us, for we were "dead in...trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1, ESV). He worked this faith, and this brought us life.

This is life even *in* death. Once again, as the Jews noticed, "Abraham died, and so did the prophets." This is historically true. And yet, true also is what Jesus said, "If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never see death." Abraham held on to the Word of God, even the Word of Jesus Christ, for Jesus also said, what is true: "Your father Abraham was glad that he would see my day. He saw it and rejoiced." He *would* see the day of Christ, and this expectation was cause for gladness. But then he *did* see the day of Christ, and this seeing was cause for *rejoicing*. This is because, even in temporal, earthly death, Abraham knew and believed the promise of God for *life* in

Christ. This is proved by the epistle to the Hebrews: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac.... He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead” (Heb. 11:17, 19, ESV). Through the veil of temporal death, we will pass, as through a portal, into eternal life. As the great hymn writer Paul Gerhardt penned: “To halls of heav’nly splendor / With Him I penetrate,”² and, “He brings me to the portal / That leads to bliss untold.”³ This is the promise of the Word of Jesus Christ. Whoever holds to it is carried by him through temporal death into eternal life: “halls of heav’nly splendor” and “bliss untold.”

But how can a mere man promise so much? What makes him so much greater than us? Why can he declare this truth, while we are precluded from being our own judges over the truth?

At the pressing of the unbelieving Jews, Jesus places the final period onto his Word: once more declaring, “Amen, Amen,” he solemnly tells the truth, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Before Abraham was born, I am.” “I am,” he says, in Hebrew אֲנִי־הוּא, a form of *Yahweh*, the name God declared of himself to Moses in the burning bush. Jesus declares, in a simple way, who he is: God incarnate.

Likewise this bespeaks his power and authority. If *Yahweh* declares life, then one can be sure there is indeed life—even *eternal* life. This is a solemn and joyful truth: Jesus is true God, and this means that the life he won by his death on the cross and resurrection from the tomb is a life that he can certainly give to those who hold on to his

² “Awake, My Heart, with Gladness,” *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, #341:7.

³ *Ibid.*, v. 8.

Word. It is enough to pay for the souls of all people. It is powerful enough to bring about life even through death.

This statement of Jesus does one more thing: it reveals that Jesus' own Word is indeed truth itself. This has been something hinted at throughout this whole discourse: throughout Jesus has declared, "I am telling the truth," and "If anyone holds on to my word, he will certainly never see death." He has also declared, "I do not seek my own glory," and "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing." And he has further declared, "Whoever belongs to God listens to what God says," and "I do know him, and I hold on to his word." Now, with this statement, "I am," Jesus proves that he and God are one and the same, so that his Word and God's Word is one and the same. This is, once again, understood if we understand the reason for Jesus' coming: to humble himself for our salvation. He had to be true man in order to take the place of men and to carry our burden of sin. He had to be true God in order for his sacrifice to cover the sins of all mankind, and in order for life to yet break the bonds of death on behalf of all mankind.

Jesus speaks the truth. Jesus is the truth. He gives life and truth to us through his death and resurrection. We, who have been made people who belong to God through the working of the Holy Spirit in that very Word, are made able to hold on to that Word, and thereby, never to see death, but to inherit eternal life.

Amen.

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